

Meditation on the picture of the prodigal by Rembrandt, using the reflections of Henri Nouwen from his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.

We are looking at the 17th century "Return of the Prodigal" by the Dutch artist Rembrandt. It was acquired by Catherine the Great for a hermitage in St. Petersburg Russia where it remains today. This magnificent 17th century painting is about a first century parable given to us by St. Luke for 21st century searchers and pilgrims. Henri Nouwen spent hours in front of this painting and then wrote his reflections on it in his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. The painting represents the spiritual homecoming of all of humankind. The prodigal child is being welcomed his father. To one side the elder brother looks on and in the background are other unknown figures who, like ourselves, contemplate the scene. As you enter into the contemplation of this picture in your prayer, consider which person you identify with most closely. How do you feel about each character? Which one most resembles your own feelings at this time.

Questions: As you look at the prodigal, what do you see? One word! As you look at the father, what strikes you? One word!

Focus on the Father now. This is a painting of a man in a great red cloak, tenderly touching the shoulders of a disheveled boy kneeling before him. We are drawn by the intimacy between the two figures, the warm red of the man's cloak, the golden yellow of the boy's tunic, and the mysterious light engulfing the two. But most of all, it is the hands, the old man's hands, as they touch the boy's shoulders, that reach us in a place where we perhaps have never before been reached.

After long, exhausting, and perhaps lonely faith journeys, that we may all have taken at one time or another, do we not LONG FOR the tender embrace of the Father; do we not LONG FOR A HOME where we can feel safe, where we can rest, and enjoy a sense of BELONGING?

What we come to see in the painting is a father and a son, God and humanity, compassion and misery, in one circle of love! the mystery of death and life, of reconciliation, forgiveness, inner healing.

Today can we dare to step out of the role of observer or bystander, and step into the place of the young man, kneel down in spirit, and let ourselves be held by our loving God? But it is also the place where we have to let go of all that we

want to hold on to; the place that confronts us with the fact that accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving it. It's the place beyond earning, deserving and rewarding; rather, it's the place of surrender and complete truth. It's the place of ðcoming to our senses, falling on our knees, and letting our tears flow freely, because we are HOME.

PAUSE

Father and Son

And so, what do we see when we pray with this painting? The son, resting against the father's breast. Notice he is dressed in rags ó rags that betray the great misery that lies behind him. The son had left home with much pride and money, determined to live his own life far away from his father and his community. He returns with nothing: his money, his health, his honor, his self-respect, his reputationí everything has been squandered. Even his head has been shaven ó like that of a common prisoner whose name has been replaced by a number. He has no red cloak like the elder son to give him status and dignity.

PAUSE

His feet / the sword

The soles of his feet tell the story of a long and humiliating journey. The left foot slipped out of its worn sandal, is scarred. The right foot, only partially covered by a broken sandal, also speaks of suffering and misery. This is a man disposed of everything í except for one thing ó his sword on his right hip, the only remaining sign of dignity, the badge of his nobility. The sword is the symbol of his sonship.

The sword is there to show us that, although he came back speaking as a beggar and an outcast, he had not forgotten that he still was the son of his father. It was this remembered and valued sonship that finally persuaded him to turn back.

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See the son against the father's heart

The son is oblivious to the stares of the bystanders, only aware of the presence of the father and the heart beat of this elderly man who holds him to his breast. The detail of the painting recalls words from the beginning of John's Gospel: "No one has ever seen God. Only the son who is closest to the Father's heart has made him known."

In the heart center of this detail, formed by the head of the son in the hollow of his father's breast, it is almost impossible to tell where one living figure ends and the other begins. The edges between humanity and divinity are obscured.

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Focus now on the Father's face

We see a half blind old man with a mustache and a parted beard, dressed in a gold embroidered garment and a deep red cloak, laying his large stiffened hands on the shoulders of his returning son.

We also see infinite compassion, unconditional love, everlasting forgiveness.

Rembrandt portrays a very still father who recognizes his son, not with the eyes of the body alone, but with the inner eye of his heart. It seems that the hands that touch the back of the returning son are the instruments of the father's inner eye.

The near blind father sees far and wide. His seeing is an eternal seeing that reaches out to all humanity, to each one of us. As father he wants his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of their leaving home, going to a distant country and losing everything. The father's heart knows all the pain that will come from this choice, but his love makes him powerless to prevent it.

The father's face reminds us of parents searching for their child. The mother searching the streets; the father searching among the homeless. Even when they fail to make contact their search never ceases. They are always waiting, always hoping.

PAUSE

The father's hands

The true center of Rembrandt's painting is the hands of the father. On them, all the light is concentrated; in them, mercy becomes flesh; upon them, forgiveness, reconciliation and healing come together. Through them, not only the tired son but the worn-out father find their rest.

The two hands are quite different. The father's left hand, touching the son's shoulder, is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the prodigal's shoulder and back. We can see a certain pressure, especially the thumb. That hand seems not only to touch, but with its strength, also to hold. Even though there is a gentleness in the way the father's left hand touches the son, it is not without a firm grip.

How different is the father's right hand. This hand does not hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and very tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality. This hand lies gently on the son's shoulder. It wants to caress, to stroke, and to offer consolation and comfort. It is a mother's hand.

The father is not simply patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds and she caresses; he confirms and she consoles!

Then there is the great red cloak. With its warm color and its arch-like shape, it offers a welcome place where it is good to be. At first, the cloak, covering the bent over body of the father, looks like a tent inviting the tired traveler to find some rest. But as we continue to gaze at the painting another image may come to mind: the sheltering wings of the mother bird. Remember Jesus' words about God's maternal love: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, How often have I longed to gather your children as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings! yet you refused!" Day and night God holds us safe, as a hen holds her chicks secure under her wing.

And so, under the aspect of an old Jewish patriarch, there emerges also a motherly God receiving her son home.

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Now consider the elder son

Standing in the background is the elder son. Less confident, and suspicious of such prodigal love displayed by his aging father, he hesitates on the verge of the

action. He hovers on the edge of the light that surrounds his father and his younger brother and yet absorbs it almost involuntarily. His face betrays feelings of puzzlement mixed with bitterness and contempt. He cannot bring himself to step over his anger and allow his father's love to heal him as well. Pride holds him back, and yet deep down he desires his father's love. The inner battle being waged within his soul is not only portrayed on his face but also in the wringing of his tightly gripped hands.

We can all empathize with the older brother's feelings. In our minds, we may find it totally unacceptable that the father would not only receive the younger son back, but would do so with such celebration. Does this mean that disloyalty, shameless immoral living, and wastefulness get rewarded, while loyalty, thrift and obedience go unrecognized?

It is understandable that, in principle, we would commiserate with the elder brother. He had done nothing wrong. He had lived by the rules. He had not left home. He had not broken his father's heart. Faith, however, is more than a matter of being obedient to rules. It has to do with a relationship with a God who loves all God's children very much. And that is something worth returning home for. Indeed, it is a cause to celebrate.

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People in the shadows

Situated in the background of the painting near the elder brother are three other figures gazing into the scene unfolding before them. These people in the shadows are situated in various degrees of diminished light as if Rembrandt wanted to indicate their different levels of involvement and interest in what is taking place.

The first figure exhibits a rather distant and vacant stare, perhaps betraying the remembrance of a long-ago missed opportunity in his own life to be reconciled.

The second figure, further in the shadows, displays only a disengaged curiosity at this emotional reunion.

The third figure. Possibly the mother, barely discernible, is not much more than a shadow and seems the most removed from the event, but possibly she is the

most engaged, on the verge of tears, overwhelmed with the joy of her son's return.

Who these people are and what role they play in the painting is a puzzle, but perhaps they call us to reflect on our own involvement in things. A life lived without passion, without risk and commitment, gives us only a shadowy kind of existence.

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The painting again as a whole

Henri Nouwen recounts in his book that one day he had a long discussion with one of his close friends and after talking with her about being the younger son or the older son, she said to him: "Whether you are the younger son or the older son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father. Look at the father in the painting and you will know who you are called to be."

Isn't that the real question for us as well.

Do we want to be like the father?

Do we want to be not just the one who is being forgiven, but also the one who forgives? Not just the one who is welcomed home, but also the one who welcomes others home; not just the one who receives compassion, but the one who offers to others the same compassion that he has offered to us.

The return to the Father is ultimately the challenge to become the Father.